

Critics say Liberal record falls short; Trudeau government has aimed to balance environment, economy

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Byline: Alex Ballingall Toronto Star

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Body

This is the first in a two-part series on climate change politics during the federal election. The second part will look at how each major party proposes to address what Parliament has declared a "climate emergency."

OTTAWA-Environmentalists look at the Liberal government's climate action these past four years and see two things at once: the best plan Canada has ever had - and one that is woefully inadequate for a looming catastrophe.

On the one hand, there is now a minimum price on carbon emissions across the country, and a plan to phase out coal-fired electricity over the next 11 years - policies that seemed unthinkable at the federal level in the not-too-distant past.

But there's also the Trans Mountain oil pipeline, which Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau nationalized for \$4.5 billion in 2018 and vows to expand for at least \$9 billion more. That leaves open the prospect Canada's largest and fastest-growing source of planet-warming pollution - the oil and gas sector - will continue to belch out more and more greenhouse gas.

It's this "cognitive dissonance" that irks Catherine Abreu, even if she credits the Liberals with piloting the federal government to confront global warming like never before.

"The way I'm thinking about it is, we have built the foundation, and now we need to build the next 20 storeys," said Abreu, executive director of Climate Action Network Canada, a group that represents a collective of the country's environmental organizations.

"They're going to have to bite the bullet," she said.

Since their earliest days in government, Trudeau's Liberals have aimed for a political sweet spot. They say they can be champions in the fight against climate change, while also remaining responsible stewards of the national economy, where tens of thousands work in an oil and gas industry that accounts for 27 per cent of Canada's emissions.

The stance has opened them to charges on both flanks. Environmentalists and opponents on the left say they've fallen short of what is required to face the existential threat of the climate crisis; Conservatives and industry groups like the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers argue the cost of their climate action is too high. With a federal election campaign now underway, where climate change and affordability rank at the top of citizens' concerns in numerous surveys, the Liberals' climate policies have already taken a prominent place in the public debate.

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Catherine McKenna, the Liberal MP for Ottawa Centre and environment minister since 2015, says the ultimate goal is to separate the Canadian economy from emissions that cause global warming. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has reported that time is running out to prevent the extremes of global warming, from mass extinctions and rising sea levels to more destructive weather and disappearing ice caps.

Canada, meanwhile, is warming twice as fast as the world average, according to government scientists, who concluded in a paper released in April that action to curb emissions can now only determine how severe the consequences will be.

But while McKenna believes the challenge of climate change is a matter of human survival and that stronger action to curb emissions will be required, she also says the government can't rush the massive changes needed to move to an economy based on renewable energy.

"Canadians want ambition, but they also want practical solutions," she told the Star this week.

McKenna pointed to the Liberal government's regulations to restrict methane emissions from industrial operations, the billions of dollars earmarked for public transit, and the new \$5,000 tax rebates for people who buy zero-emission vehicles. There's also the carbon price imposed in four provinces so far where 90 per cent of the revenues are legally mandated to be returned as tax rebates to people that pay the levy.

"We were very mindful on the affordability piece," McKenna said. "That's what you need to do. You need to map this out in a responsible way."

For Mark Jaccard, a professor of sustainable energy at Simon Fraser University, the most significant action the Liberal government has taken is to phase out coal-fired power. The Liberals pledged that Canada's electricity grid will be 90 per cent non-emitting - with only nuclear, wind, hydro, solar sources.

Jaccard believes this is most significant, not because of the emissions reductions at home, but how the Liberals have been able to parlay the pledge onto the international scene. Canada is a lead player in the "Powering Past Coal Alliance," a collective of countries that now includes the likes of the United Kingdom, France and Germany that have agreed to wean off coal-fired power.

Given how climate change is a global issue that Canada can't confront alone, measures to spur action beyond our borders matter, said Jaccard.

"It's what we do in our system that will reverberate through the world," he said. "You have to think globally, act locally, and then try to make your local actions have a global effect."

But as other political parties have been quick to point out, even with the measures the Liberals implemented in power, Canada is still on track to miss its emissions reduction target of 30 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030, according to the latest government projection published last year.

Abreu said this shortfall is an even bigger problem when you consider that some of the Liberals' signature climate policies have been "watered down." The methane regulations, for example, were delayed from 2020 to 2023, after Donald Trump was elected in the United States and bailed on a joint regime for the gas that was in the works under his predecessor. The promised clean fuel standards - which are projected to bring significant annual emissions reductions of 30 million tonnes - are yet to be implemented, and the government lowered the portion of emissions subject to the carbon price to protect heavy polluters from competitors in countries where there is no such levy on greenhouse gas.

"We have the anchors for a diverse set of climate policies," Abreu said. "Now we need to ratchet them up."

Keith Stewart, senior energy strategist with Greenpeace Canada, said the Liberals' action on climate change can be described as "one step forward, one step back." They came into power promising a new era of political action to fight climate change, and yet he argues they have failed to seriously tackle Canada's oil and gas industry.

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"Everyone would love to have their cake and eat it too," he said. "This is where we haven't seen politics differently."

Jaccard, meanwhile, argues the Liberals may have made a strategic mistake in placing so much emphasis on the national carbon price. While economists often say a tax on emissions is an efficient way to discourage them by making pollution more expensive, Jaccard said it's also a policy that is vulnerable to political attacks.

Witness the cohort of Conservative premiers who, along with federal Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, have turned against the Liberal government on climate policy, alleging the carbon price is really a tax grab that will hurt the economy and kill jobs.

"Carbon pricing has been shown to be politically difficult, at least to have a role as the lead policy," said Jaccard, who believes smoother progress to reduce emissions may be found in "flexible regulations" like the clean fuel standard and rules to ensure new vehicles burn less gasoline.

McKenna said the government always knew the carbon price was "going to be the hardest piece" of their climate plan, and the election of conservative governments in Ontario and Alberta made it even harder.

"It's a challenge sometimes communicating it, and I think we've worked really hard on it," she said, accusing the Conservatives of peddling misinformation in a bid to gain votes.

"I don't regret it, in the sense that, we have to do hard things in politics," she said.

Where her opponents see contradiction, McKenna sees balance. Where others see disappointment, she sees pragmatism.

What Canadians see will be clearer when it comes time to vote, just a few weeks from now.

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